

## Understanding the Role and Place of Smartphones in EFL Education

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The Asian Conference on Education & International Development 2026  
Official Conference Proceedings

### Abstract

This study investigates the integration of smartphones into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in Japan, with a focus on student engagement, pedagogical practices, and institutional challenges. A literature review was combined with systematic classroom observations conducted in six non-English-major EFL classes (95 students with varying proficiency levels) over eight weeks (2024–2025). Patterns of smartphone use for learning were examined during 100-minute lessons, including vocabulary study, pronunciation practice, and collaborative tasks. Classroom engagement was assessed using a structured observation checklist to record smartphone-related behaviors. The findings indicate that well-structured smartphone activities are associated with increased participation, attentiveness, and willingness to respond, particularly during vocabulary quizzes and in collaborative projects. Student disengagement was linked to the perception of smartphones as entertainment devices rather than to limited access. The study highlights that the effectiveness of smartphone integration depends on a clear pedagogical design, explicit task instructions, active teacher monitoring, and institutional support in the form of reliable infrastructure and coherent usage guidelines. While the use of smartphones in EFL learning offers significant opportunities, it also presents technical, institutional, and pedagogical challenges. Therefore, effective implementation requires reliable infrastructure, consistent institutional policies, and sustained teacher training. Future research should focus on quantitatively assessing language proficiency outcomes. Further investigation is also needed into how smartphone use shapes teacher-student relationships and classroom dynamics.

*Keywords:* mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), smartphones, EFL learning, student engagement, Japanese higher education

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## Introduction

Mobile technologies have become important tools for education and language learning. As of 2022, Japan had approximately 107.12 million smartphone users, representing about 85% of the population (Park, 2023). Technology continues to transform traditional teaching methods, and smartphones have emerged as valuable tools in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, offering new opportunities for language acquisition (Zou et al., 2022). The mobility and easy access to a wide range of materials provided by smartphones have accelerated their integration into EFL classrooms. Global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have further normalized remote and hybrid learning. Previous research suggests that smartphones play an important role in enhancing language learning experiences and maintaining educational continuity (Wrigglesworth, 2020). However, teachers need to establish clear rules and guidelines to reduce distractions and help students remain focused. Bluestein and Kim (2017) emphasize that teachers require proper training, including both technical skills and pedagogical strategies, to effectively select and manage applications for maximum benefit.

Despite the growing research on Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), there remains limited classroom-based observational research examining how smartphones are actually used during EFL lessons in the Japanese university context and how this use affects student engagement and classroom dynamics. To address this gap, this study examines the use of smartphones in Japanese university EFL classrooms through classroom observation, focusing on student engagement, pedagogical practices, and institutional challenges.

## Research Questions

- RQ1. How does the integration of smartphones in the classroom influence student engagement in EFL classrooms?
- RQ2. What benefits does smartphone integration bring to EFL classrooms?
- RQ3. What challenges do teachers and students encounter when implementing smartphones in EFL learning?

## Methodology

This study employed classroom observations and a literature review to examine smartphone use in English classes. The literature review included scientific journal articles, conference papers, books, and online academic and institutional sources that provided relevant insights into this topic. This approach enabled the researcher to analyze existing studies, identify key themes, and potential directions for further research.

Classroom observations were conducted in six non-English-major EFL classes at a private Japanese university between 2024–2025. The focus was on how students used smartphones to learn English, including their behavioral engagement, participation, and interaction with teachers and peers. The classes included students with varying proficiency levels, and each class met twice a week. The study included 95 students enrolled in first and second-year courses. Observations were carried out over eight weeks, covering 16 lessons per semester. Each observation lasted a full 100-minute lesson, allowing the researcher to monitor smartphone use and student interactions over time.

A structured observation checklist was used to record smartphone-related behaviors, such as vocabulary study, note-taking, pronunciation practice, and collaborative tasks. The checklist

also included categories related to student engagement, such as on-task behavior, participation, and peer interaction. To ensure consistency, observations were conducted using note-taking at regular time intervals during each lesson.

Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that all collected data would remain confidential and would not affect their grades. Observations focused on classroom learning behaviors rather than personal identification, and no individual data were reported. The participants were of similar age and educational backgrounds.

## **Literature Review**

Researchers have conducted numerous studies on the integration of technology into language learning, focusing on both technological development and pedagogical impact. Bitzer established the foundation for Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), which later evolved into Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), demonstrating how technology influences language acquisition and teaching methods (Nuraeni et al., 2020). As mobile devices became more affordable and portable, CALL gradually transitioned into MALL.

Mobile learning (m-learning) emerged in the early 2000s as researchers began exploring the potential of mobile devices in education. Many studies highlight features such as social interactivity, connectivity, portability, context sensitivity, and individuality as key factors in supporting learning beyond the classroom (Kumar et al., 2018).

Barr (2011) at Kanda University of International Studies conducted a study to examine how students used mobile phones for English learning in the classroom. He interviewed twenty-four Japanese students about their smartphone use in class. His findings showed that students used smartphones to: (1) take pictures of the whiteboard to capture notes, (2) record their instructors to remember pronunciation, (3) use Google's voice recognition features while practicing pronunciation, (4) use mobile-based flashcard apps to improve vocabulary, and (5) search for additional materials to support their reading skills. He concluded that mobile devices can be beneficial for learning English. Moreover, 93% of the students in his study believed that mobile phones were valuable educational tools that enhanced their language learning.

Lai et al. (2022) examined how smartphones affect students' psychology, finding that well-designed smartphone-based learning activities can reduce anxiety while enhancing autonomy and motivation. However, Seo et al. (2023) found that excessive smartphone use—referred to as “mobile phone dependency,” “mobile phone addiction,” or “problematic mobile phone use” can lead to various psychological, physiological, and social issues. These contrasting findings suggest that the relationship between smartphone use and learning outcomes is not straightforwardly positive; it rather depends on pedagogical design and purposefulness.

It is worth noting that most existing MALL research relies on self-reported surveys. Classroom-based observations, particularly in the Japanese university context, remain rare. With continuous technological advancement, further studies are expected to provide deeper insights into both the benefits and challenges of smartphone use in EFL learning.

### **Benefits of Smartphone Integration in EFL Classrooms**

The integration of smartphones into EFL classrooms offers numerous benefits. Accessibility is a key factor driving their adoption in language learning, as smartphones are the preferred

devices for internet access among young people in Japan (Park, 2023). Their powerful processors, high-quality cameras, and advanced audio systems make them portable multimedia learning tools capable of supporting real-time, interactive learning (Zou et al., 2022).

Since Japanese university students already own smartphones and are familiar with their use, integrating them into learning can enhance both in-class and out-of-class language practice. Instructors can use students' existing digital knowledge as a pedagogical resource. Therefore, teaching methods should align with technological developments to maximize their pedagogical potential.

Smartphones also support independent and personalized learning. Research shows that mobile applications can increase student motivation and engagement by transforming passive learning into active participation (Wang et al., 2022). Applications such as Quizlet, Duolingo, and Memrise offer gamified features that support grammar practice, vocabulary development, and pronunciation improvement (Kacetl & Klímová, 2019). These tools also promote adaptive learning, allowing students to focus on areas that require more practice and learn at their own pace (Vasquez, 2019).

In addition, smartphones support collaborative and communicative learning, which are central to EFL pedagogy. They facilitate collaboration through document-sharing tools, messaging applications, and group project platforms (Avcı & Adiguzel, 2017). Such activities enhance both linguistic and interpersonal skills, aligning with communicative approaches to language teaching. Access to authentic materials and intercultural content further strengthens learners' cultural awareness, which is an essential aspect of English use in a global context.

### **Challenges of Smartphone Integration in EFL Learning**

Despite these advantages, several challenges were identified. These can be categorized into technical and pedagogical challenges, both of which influence the effectiveness of mobile learning.

#### **Technical Challenges**

Educators need to prepare backup plans in case of technical issues, such as alternative activities when student devices fail to function. In addition, institutions must provide a reliable network infrastructure capable of supporting multiple simultaneous connections, along with appropriate cybersecurity measures to protect student data. These considerations suggest that effective smartphone integration requires proper institutional support and management.

#### **Institutional and Pedagogical Challenges**

Teachers need both technical competence and pedagogical awareness to design meaningful mobile-assisted activities and manage classroom behavior effectively.

Inconsistent institutional policies regarding smartphone use can also complicate implementation, especially when restrictions are applied without considering pedagogical goals. Educators play an important role in guiding students to develop digital responsibility and ethical awareness by helping them distinguish between smartphones as entertainment tools and learning resources.

Addressing these challenges requires targeted professional development, clear instructional objectives, and consistent monitoring of student engagement to ensure that smartphone use supports learning rather than distracts from it. Teachers' professional development should include real classroom scenarios, device troubleshooting, and strategies to combine technology with pedagogy. Regular workshops and peer-sharing sessions can help teachers keep up with emerging technologies. Institutions implementing smartphone integration must budget for continuous professional development.

Continued support helps schools build sustainable digital learning environments. Effective implementation depends on reliable infrastructure, consistent institutional policies, and sustained teacher training.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study provide observational insights into how smartphone use in Japanese university EFL classrooms influences student engagement and learning practices. Classroom observations showed increased participation during smartphone-based activities, such as vocabulary quizzes (e.g., Quizlet) and collaborative tasks (e.g., messaging applications for group work). For example, students who initially appeared tired or distracted were able to refocus and actively engage in classroom activities.

Students were generally more willing to respond, collaborate, and remain on task when activities incorporated familiar digital tools. For instance, students curated their learning by blending educational content with personal entertainment preferences, watching English-language films, listening to music, or using language apps, thus transforming learning into a meaningful and engaging activity (Viberg et al., 2023). While these observations are encouraging, it is important to note that increased engagement does not necessarily mean improved language proficiency. This study did not measure learning outcomes, and future research should examine whether observable engagement translates into measurable gains. In addition, smartphones enable flexible, individualized learning, allowing students to work at their own pace and revisit content as needed.

However, several challenges were also observed. One recurring issue was student distraction. Although most students used their smartphones appropriately, occasional off-task behavior, such as checking social media, playing games, messaging friends, or taking unrelated photos, was noted and sometimes disrupted the flow of learning. These observations highlight the need for effective teacher management to ensure appropriate use of devices in the classroom.

Students' perceptions of smartphones also influenced their level of engagement. Those who viewed smartphones primarily as entertainment devices tended to demonstrate lower levels of focus during learning activities. It is important to note that issues related to access and resource availability, often reported in lower socioeconomic contexts, were not observed in this study.

Observations further revealed that lessons were more effective when instructors provided clear instructions for smartphone-based tasks, explained their pedagogical purpose, and actively monitored student progress and device use. In contrast, unclear instructions often resulted in increased off-task behavior. This finding suggests a direct relationship between instructional clarity and appropriate device use. It also reinforces the argument that teacher preparation is critical in successful MALL implementation.

This study focused on observable indicators of engagement, such as participation, collaboration, and on-task behavior, rather than direct measures of language proficiency. Engagement was defined as active involvement in classroom activities, including responding to prompts and working with peers. Overall, the findings suggest that smartphones can enhance EFL classroom practices by promoting engagement, supporting autonomous learning, and facilitating collaboration when their use is carefully structured. At the same time, their effectiveness depends on clear pedagogical design, teacher guidance, and institutional support. Smartphones are most effective when used as complementary tools that enhance traditional instruction.

### **Implications**

From a pedagogical perspective, smartphones can support dynamic and interactive EFL lessons that accommodate different proficiency levels and learning styles. They provide immediate feedback, facilitate collaboration, and offer access to authentic materials, allowing students to practice language skills both inside and outside the classroom. However, their effectiveness depends on careful lesson planning and clear instructional guidance. Teachers should design smartphone tasks with explicit linguistic objectives and build in reflection moments where students think about the language they have used or encountered.

From an institutional perspective, smartphones represent a cost-effective alternative to traditional computer labs and language learning resources. Their portability and flexibility enable learners to integrate language practice into their daily routines, supporting sustained engagement and long-term knowledge retention. Institutions should therefore provide reliable infrastructure, clear policies, and ongoing support and training for teachers.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

This study has several limitations. First, these findings are based on classroom observations and do not directly measure long-term language development. Second, the study does not examine the impact of smartphone use on teacher–student interaction or curriculum design. Future research should investigate how smartphone use influences long-term teacher–student relationships, classroom dynamics, and language development.

Third, this study does not measure improvements in learning outcomes. Future empirical research should focus on assessing students' language proficiency gains associated with smartphone use in EFL classrooms.

Fourth, this study was conducted at a single private Japanese University. Findings may not generalize to other institutional types. Comparative studies across multiple sites with more participants would strengthen the evidence base.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that well-designed smartphone integration can enhance classroom engagement in Japanese university EFL contexts. The observational data suggest that when smartphone activities are clearly structured, pedagogically purposeful, and actively monitored, students demonstrate higher levels of participation and on-task behaviors. While smartphones can enhance engagement, support learner autonomy, and provide access to authentic materials, technical, institutional, and pedagogical challenges remain. Therefore, successful implementation requires clear institutional policies, reliable digital infrastructure,

and ongoing teacher training. As the observation suggests understanding, smartphones also support personalized learning experiences that contribute to both digital literacy and language development. Their affordability and accessibility make them practical tools for institutions seeking to modernize their teaching practices. By addressing the identified challenges and applying the recommendations outlined in this study, educators can maximize the benefits of smartphone integration and improve language learning outcomes. Ultimately, the question is no longer whether students have smartphones, but how we manage them and how we design learning environments that use students' digital abilities to move students away from "distraction mode" toward meaningful and active participation.

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